

The Go-Getter of Sports and Business Isn't Going to Stop Until He's Got the Yankees Playing Like Yankees Again

By WILLIAM REEL

MIKE BURKE has been a college football star, a World War II hero whose behind-enemy-lines exploits inspired a Hollywood movie, a drinking buddy of Ernest Hemingway, and an executive genius whose business acumen made millions for the Columbia Broadcasting System. But the biggest challenge of his career is in front of him.

"I won't be satisfied," the dapper, gray-maned, 50-year-old Yankee boss was saying recently in his plush private lounge at the Stadium, "until the Yankees are once again the champions of the world."

Burke will be older and grayer when that happens. The defused Bronx Bombers finished last in 1966 and are floundering in the second division this year. The team that menaced American League pitching for decades simply does not hit any more.

Moreover, the previous Yankee administration left the club a legacy of ill will that even Burke, a shrewd and imaginative public relations man, will be a long time expunging.

Nice Gesture

An incident early this season showed that Burke's concern with building a better image for the Yankees is genuine. As he was walking into the executive offices at the Stadium before a home game, two urchins who looked like waifs in a Dickens novel came running up, shouting, "Hey, Mistah Burke!"

Without breaking stride, the Yankee president put a paternal arm around each of them and whisked them into the ball park. The boys watched the game from his private box next to the Yankee dugout. It was a completely spontaneous gesture on Burke's part, witnessed only by a reporter whom he wouldn't have recognized had he seen him.

Treating a couple of kids to a ball game is not, of course, a surpassing act of generosity. But it was significant in this case because it symbolized a radical departure from traditional Yankee policy, which was never renowned for benevolence.

Burke was asked to discuss his attitude toward the fan.

"Baseball is a highly visible, parochial

business," he said, "and it belongs to the community. Unfortunately, the Yankees had acquired a reputation for being aloof and remote. We are in the process of creating a climate in the ball park that makes people feel cared for and concerned about."

"Yankee Stadium was never intended to be a place simply to sit down. Fans should be treated as though they were guests in one's house. I intend to see that they are."

"We are determined to make attendance at Yankee Stadium a pleasant experience," he said. "We've distributed a booklet, 'Going First Class,' to the employees to spell out their obligations. The booklet stresses courtesy. The most difficult thing is impressing the employees that you really mean it when you tell them you want to make the fans feel welcome and comfortable."

One Warning

Surly ushers and concession hawkers get one warning, and are fired if they fail to shape up. Burke does not suffer recalcitrants gladly. As he was leaving the ball park recently, he was mobbed by kids seeking his autograph. A special cop, thinking he was doing the boss a favor, began shooing the kids away. Burke shooed the cop away, and signed the kids' programs.

Burke, who described Yankee Stadium as "no youthful beauty, but a grand old girl nonetheless" when he took over the Yankee presidency last fall, was dismayed by its greivish-green color—"its drabness symbolized the overall Yankee image," he said—and drenched it in white paint. He also had the inside of the park spruced up.

He instituted other reforms: setting aside certain dates when kids can meet the players and get autographs; increasing to 300,000 the number of youngsters admitted free in various groups, and outfitting the grandstand food and drink salesmen in pop art ponchos.

But, as Burke is the first to stress, there is no substitute for good baseball and a winning team. All the colorful packaging in the world won't put hits in the Bombers' sickly bats.

"Winning is paramount," he said. "That is why I hired Lee MacPhail, who built a championship team in Baltimore."

As general manager, I feel that manager Ralph Houk is the man who can get the most out of our club on the field. We've streamlined our scouting system and our minor league operation, and both will soon be producing an abundance of good young ballplayers."

Burke hasn't missed a home game this year, and attends most of the road games. Sitting in his box next to the dugout, he does not relax and enjoy. He cheers lustily for every Yankee hit. But his language when a Yankee commits a mental lapse is blue.

In a recent home game against the Red Sox, catcher Jake Gibbs failed to pursue a pop foul which he could have caught. Burke had several things to say about the mental lapse, the first of which was "God damn it, Jake, what the hell are you thinking about?" Then, turning to the guy next to him, he said, "Ralph will give him what for, you can be sure."

Baseball Rarity

Although his reaction to Gibbs' blunder was typically baseball, in many ways Burke is totally untypical of those in the game. He uses expressions like *ne plus ultra* and *viva voce*, and his most casual utterances would drive Mike Epstein to the dictionary.

His pinstripe suits, which taper at the waist and flare at the hips, are tailored in Rome. His favorite piece of writing is "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," a poem by William Butler Yeats. He sits on the board of directors of the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center.

When Burke showed up at spring training this past spring he told a sports-writer, "One of the attractions of baseball is that it renews itself each spring. It is the re-awakening of the earth, the coming to life of nature. Its appeal is fundamental. It is one man with a ball against one man with a bat. In baseball a man is naked and exposed. It is absolutely naked and true."

This poetical flight shook up the tobacco-chewers within earshot... and it's possible that some of them got the wrong impression of the new Yankee boss. Burke is a many-sided man, and fits into nobody's mold.

BORN IN ENFIELD, CONN. Burke won a sports and academic scholarship to Kingswood School in West Hartford, where he excelled in football and baseball. Not content simply to play sports, he also recorded the events for the Hartford Times. "For these essays," said Burke, who today earns more than \$100,000 a year, "I received the munificent sum of 10 cents an inch."

Burke was a star halfback at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1930s, when Penn ranked among the top 10 teams in the country. Although the Philadelphia Eagles signed him after graduation, he quit the pros early in his

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first season because the salary, \$125 a game, wasn't enough. The decision to bid football farewell was a difficult one.

"The sheer force of habit of putting on spikes was difficult to break," he recalled. "My bones and body were formed on athletic fields. It was a very difficult decision to make."

Shortly, however, Burke was involved in competition of a deadlier kind. Commissioned in the U.S. Navy in World War II, he met Gen. 'Wild Bill' Donovan at a Washington gathering. Donovan, who remembered the former halfback from a kickoff return he'd made in the rain against Michigan, asked him to join his Office of Strategic Services, which was America's first cloak and dagger outfit.

Burke speaks easily but in soft tones about his OSS experiences.

"There were two major missions," he said. "In 1943 I was one of a group put ashore from a PT boat in Italy. Our mission was to make contact with Admiral Gerosi, the anti-Fascist Commando Supremo of the Italian navy. We were disguised as peasants, and since I could speak only a little Italian, I kept my head down and my mouth shut most of the time."

"We used intermediaries to contact Gerosi. The idea was to convince him it would be in Italy's best interest . . . the better part of valor, so to speak . . . if he would persuade the Italian fleet to surrender when the Allies landed in Salerno. We didn't know until D-Day itself, when they did surrender, that we had been successful."

Close Call

Burke recalled one harrowingly close call on this mission.

"Of course," he said, "there may have been many close calls. You never know. But there was one time when I said to myself, 'We've had it.' Our PT boat was idling toward the beach to let us off to row ashore when suddenly we spotted several German boats cruising about 100 yards away. I was resigned to the certainty of being captured. But they went right on by."

"Perhaps they saw us and figured that since we were so close to shore we couldn't possibly have been an enemy craft."

In 1944, Burke parachuted into the Vosges Mountains in France to help organize the French resistance. His contact was an elderly ex-gendarme from Paris who had retired to the village of Confrancourt. He and his wife put Burke up and put him in touch with resistance leaders in the area.

"I stayed in their small house for several days," Burke said, "and then one Sunday my instinct told me to get the hell out of there. Sure enough, the Ger-

mans arrived in the town that night. The officer in charge, I later found out, was the same one I had seen in the movie. Burke led a resistance group in guerrilla attacks on the Germans.

"Eventually they got bloody sick and tired of having their bridges blown up and their supplies stolen," he said, "and they sent a regiment to clean us out. By that time we were about 300 strong. After a two-day battle we ran out of ammunition. We decided we had no choice but to evaporate into the woods and try to escape."

"Just as we were about to scatter we got a sky drop of ammunition. We were able to hang on, and eventually drove the Germans off."

AFTER THE ALLIES liberated Paris, Burke arrived at the hotel which billeted Navy personnel. Having spent weeks fighting in the woods, he was not his usual meticulously groomed self. The admiral in charge immediately called him on the carpet for not wearing the proper attire.

"I arrived in France via parachute, sir," Burke informed the admiral icily, "and dress blues didn't seem appropriate for the occasion."

With that, Burke departed for more congenial surroundings.

A Reunion

"I walked into the Ritz bar and felt a hand slap me on the back. 'Mike, I thought you were dead!' someone shouted in my ear. It was Papa."

It's a safe bet that Mike Burke is the only man in baseball who ever called Ernest Hemingway Papa. Burke first met him at Foynes Airport in Ireland in 1941. It was early in the morning and Hemingway had just come off a plane. "Who would like a gin and tonic for breakfast?" he asked loudly. "I would," said Mike Burke.

"We had a good many gin and tonics, as I recall," Burke said, "and he told me to look him up in London. I did and we became good friends. Just before I went into France I wrote him that I'd just re-read 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' and that I hoped we'd meet again soon. So, I suppose, that's why he was glad to see me at the Ritz."

"He invited me to spend my Paris leave with him. He was there as a war correspondent for a magazine and was naturally interested in all the details of my OSS experiences. Papa was a smashing, impeccable friend to me."

Burke was awarded the Silver Star and the Navy Cross for his OSS exploits. His Italian adventure inspired a film, "Cloak and Dagger," in which Gary Cooper portrayed Burke. He went to Hollywood as a technical consultant on

the movie. The film was released in 1946, and he remained in the business as a scriptwriter. He was also appointed special advisor to the U. S. High Commission to Germany.

Burke's first executive job was as general manager of Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus, where he remained for two years. Then he joined CBS. After a stint as president of CBS Europe he was called back to New York and assigned to develop new business activities for the broadcasting company.

Burke quickly proved himself a shrewd judge of investments. He persuaded CBS to buy two small companies, Creative Toy and Fender Guitar, both of which showed soaring profits after an injection of CBS cash got them rolling.

When CBS brought the final 10% of Dan Topping's stock in the Yankees at the end of last season, Burke put himself in charge of the ball club. Although he was always a more than casual fan, baseball has become his consuming interest.

Burke's wife, Timothy, a former fashion editor he met in his Hollywood days, frequently accompanies him to the ball park. Mrs. Burke admits she knew nothing about baseball a year ago, but is becoming an informed fan under her husband's tutelage. She has met several of the players, and nominated Ruben Amaro and Bill Robinson as "most charming."

'The Greatest'

Burke has already made an indelible mark on the Yankees (and boosted the attendance 23% over last year) in his short reign. Early this season, the TV cameras picked up two kids carrying banners in the outfield. One of them read, not surprisingly, "We Love Mickey." The other said, "Mike Burke Is the Greatest."

But there is a tough side to Mike Burke, executive. When he first joined Ringling Bros., there was a fellow named Charlie who followed the circus all over the country, running a crap game for the performers. Burke tried to tell him, in a nice way, that his services were no longer required.

"Jimmy Blue Eyes [a Miami racketeer guy from whom Charlie took orders] won't like it if you kick me out," said Charlie.

"I'm warning you to get the hell out," Burke said.

That night he saw Charlie again running the crap game. One short right to the jaw later, Charlie was on his back looking up at Burke. He left the premises immediately.

"Not terribly subtle of me," Burke said, "but it did help establish my authority."

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